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FM AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6242
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMISTA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SANTO DOMINGO 003086

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/26/2016

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SUBJECT: FERNANDEZ CRIME INITIATIVES CREDITED FOR DROP IN DOMINICAN HOMICIDE RATE

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 02465

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: Violent crime statistics for the month of August showed a significant reduction in the country's homicide rate, which many attribute to the success of President Fernandez's July anti-crime initiatives. Of note is the low incidence of extrajudicial killings carried out by police in so-called "exchanges of gunfire," despite heightened law enforcement patrols incorporating thousands of untrained soldiers. Polls show continued public support for the anti-crime program, but many businesses are unhappy with the lost revenue attributed to mandatory early closings for alcohol sales. The success of the initiatives appears to have bolstered Police Chief Santana Paez's position at the head of the National Police. END SUMMARY.

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Anti-Crime Initiatives Remain in Force
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¶12. (U) In a continuation of the "Safe Neighborhood" ("Barrio Seguro") program initiated by the Fernandez administration in July 2006, thousands of members of the Armed Forces and National Police continue to patrol the streets of Dominican neighborhoods each night. Their purpose is two-fold: first, to remain on alert for criminal activity, and second, to enforce compliance with the country's new curfews on the sale of alcoholic beverages (12 midnight on weekdays, 2 a.m. on weekdays). The Dominican Secretary of the Armed Forces says that approximately 10,000 military have participated or are participating in the nightly patrols.

¶13. (U) DAO contacts say that military soldiers participating in the patrols have yet to receive specific training on civilian law enforcement techniques. Soldiers are given the option of purchasing (using their own funds) a law enforcement manual written to assist them, but the manual does not outline rules of engagement.

¶14. (U) NAS contacts indicate that the military no longer actively patrol the streets alongside their counterparts in the National Police. Instead, soldiers are stationed at a number of "staging areas" at locations around the country, from which they can be deployed as needed to sites or incidents in their vicinities.

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Statistics Show Progress, at least for Now
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¶ 15. (U) The country's murder rate has fallen significantly since the initiatives took effect in late July. According to police statistics, 123 violent deaths were carried out in August 2006, the first continuous month during which the anti-crime initiatives were in force. This figure represents a 33 percent reduction from the preceding month and made August the least violent month of the past two years.

¶ 16. (U) The heightened law enforcement activity and the incorporation of untrained soldiers into civilian law enforcement patrols does not yet appear to have led to an increase in the number of civilians killed by police. Only 18 civilians were killed in so-called "exchanges of gunfire" during the month of August, a reduction of 50 percent from the preceding month. There have been no reports of civilian deaths attributed to military soldiers during law enforcement patrols.

Public Support Remains Strong

¶ 17. (U) Recent polls reveal strong public support for the anti-crime initiatives. Despite the Dominicans' well-earned reputation as a late-night party culture, a Gallup poll taken in mid-August indicated 88 percent of those polled to be in favor of the new closing times for the sale of alcoholic beverages. Furthermore, 96 percent of those surveyed expressed support for the integration of military soldiers into civilian law enforcement patrols.

¶ 18. (U) The strong public support enjoyed by the initiatives owes to several factors: first, a general unease throughout Dominican society owing to public perceptions of worsening levels of violence. In the months leading up to the initiatives' implementation, spontaneous demonstrations at locations around the country, some involving thousands of protesters, had demanded heightened government action to combat rising levels of violence. Additionally, polls reveal that the Dominican military as an institution enjoys a far higher level of public trust than does the country's National Police.

¶ 19. (U) Prominent voices in civil society are expressing support for the new initiatives. The director of civic organization "Participacion Ciudadania" recently expressed his satisfaction with the effects of the initiatives, noting that the Dominican public is now "enjoying higher levels of tranquility and calm thanks to the mixed (military-police) patrols in our streets." Monsenor Agripino Nunez Collado, who heads the country's Catholic university PUCMM, has also indicated support for the new initiatives.

Businesses Complain but Suffer a Setback

¶ 10. (U) Owners of restaurants, nightclubs and colmados (small neighborhood groceries/corner stores) have complained that the new restrictions are seriously diminishing their earnings. A group of small, medium and large businesses affiliated with the entertainment sector of the economy published an open letter to President Fernandez in several newspapers, complaining of a 40 percent reduction in sales since the new decrees took effect. They avowed support for the anti-crime strategy in principle but proposed alternative closing times of 2am on weekdays and 4am on weekends.

¶ 11. (U) The powerful Cerveceria Nacional (National Brewery), which produces the popular "Presidente" brand of beer, has gone further, claiming in early August that there was no research conclusively linking violent crime to alcohol consumption. The firm has complained of a 10 percent reduction in revenue since the new restrictions took effect. Such a loss could be more damaging than it might appear, as

the company asserts that it is responsible for generating approximately 3 percent of Dominican GDP and 7 percent of the country's tax revenue.

¶12. (U) The case for relaxing the restrictions on the sale of alcoholic beverages suffered a severe setback last week with the killing of 22-year-old Alexandra Nunez Rodriguez, shot dead by a bouncer at a local Santo Domingo nightclub. The club, named Praia, catered to upper-middle and upper class youth and was notorious for routinely denying entry to darker-skinned individuals. According to witness accounts, the shooting was triggered by a dispute over the bouncer's decision to deny entry to one of the victim's darker-skinned acquaintances. The bouncer has been arrested and is under investigation; a judge has closed the club for three months, an apparently arbitrary measure that has raised concern among some observers of legal procedure.

¶13. (U) Former president Hipolito Mejia, whose statements continue to garner significant media attention, has been openly critical of the new initiatives. While conceding that the government "had to do something" to combat rising levels of crime, Mejia asserts that the Dominican military and police are incapable of maintaining their current level of mobilization indefinitely.

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Comment
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¶14. (U) Despite the obvious political motivations of the Fernandez Administration to make its mark against crime, the Embassy finds that their statistics are essentially correct. The country's National Institute of Forensic Sciences (INACIF) operates under the Office of the Attorney General (Procuraduria) and releases its own statistics on violent deaths; those match almost exactly the figures published by the National Police. Dominican media reports that hospitals in the country have seen similar reductions in injuries involving gunshot wounds.

¶15. (U) All indications point to the continuation of the initiatives for the foreseeable future. President Fernandez has declined to relax the restrictions on the sale of

alcohol, noting that society (read: business owners) must make concessions for the sake of public good. The unaccustomed mobilization of such large numbers of soldiers and police may place some strain on both institutions, but as long as the political will to continue funding the operations remains intact, Embassy believes the program can remain feasible. In any case, the addition of law enforcement duties for active-duty military personnel is unlikely to impact their military readiness, since they had not, in a real sense, been engaged in the performance of traditional military functions anyway.

¶16. (U) One should refrain from reading too much in the statistics. The administration's anti-crime initiatives have been in place for only two months, and the numbers may represent a "bounce" effect. The keystone of Fernandez's strategy -- using the country's military to police the streets -- smacks of being a "quick fix" to a problem with far deeper roots.

¶17. (C) Police Chief Bernardo Santana Paez remains in his position, despite his frequent differences with his putative boss, Interior Minister Franklin Almeyda. Rumors had circulated for months concerning a possible ouster. But fighting crime in the neighborhoods has been a growing preoccupation over the past year, and the success of the anti-crime initiatives has done much to bolster his position. Tensions remain, and his future is far from assured, particularly since his deputy Gen. Guzman Fermin, son of a former police chief, regards himself as equally qualified for the job.

¶18. (U) Drafted by Alexander T. Bryan.

¶19. (U) This report and other material can be consulted on our SIPRNET site,
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo/> .
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